

EATING DISORDERS INFORMATION
AND EDUCATION ACT

HON. PATRICIA SCHROEDER

OF COLORADO

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Tuesday, May 23, 1995

Mrs. SCHROEDER. Mr. Speaker, today I am introducing the Eating Disorders Information and Education Act, which provides outreach and education for the increasing number of people—primarily women and young girls—with eating disorders.

Eating disorders and self-induced vomiting, compulsive dieting, binge-eating and self-starvation regimes afflicting 7 million women and 1 million men, according to the National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders [ANAD]. Their cause is complex, but studies have looked at genetics, environments, biochemistry and personalities. Certainly, there is a strong link between these disorders and the pressure to be thin in our society.

It is estimated that about 6 percent of those with serious cases die, and only 50 percent report being cured. While 86 percent report onset of the disorder by age 20, even those 10 years and younger are known to suffer from it.

Eating disorders typically last one to 15 years. Treatment is often expensive and longer—\$30,000 or more a month for inpatient treatment and \$100,000 or more for outpatient care. Many find their insurance doesn't cover treatment.

Even though eating disorders are widespread, no State has an adequate program to combat them, and few schools have programs to educate youth about them, according to ANAD.

My bill helps address this lack of public knowledge. It amends the Public Health Service Act to establish a program providing information and education to the public on the prevention and treatment of eating disorders. That program would be carried out by the Center for Mental Health Services, which would also provide a toll-free public hotline offering information and referrals for prevention and treatment. The bill authorizes \$2 million for fiscal year 1996 and such sums as are necessary for fiscal years 1997 through 1998.

I was particularly moved by the story of Ellen Hart Pena, wife of our Transportation Secretary Federico Pena, in the April 10 issue of *People* magazine. She told of her more than 10-year struggle to break free of anorexia and bulimia. Only after long-term therapy did she end the cycle of starvation diets and bingeing and purging. I would like to include her story for the RECORD.

[Taken from *People* Magazine, April 10, 1995]

HITTING HER STRIDE

(By Ellen Hart Peña)

I remembered exactly the moment it began. It was January 1980, during my senior year at Harvard where I ran on the track team. My coach had suggested that I lose some weight over Christmas break to help me run faster, and I had worked out every day and gone from 132 to 123 pounds. But when I came back from vacation I had a really crummy workout, and the coach said it looked as if I were gaining back the weight.

That was the click. If he'd made the same comment to me a year earlier it probably wouldn't have had any effect. But I was just

four months from graduation and at a point where I was scared about being an adult, about being a woman and going out into the world. Until then, my life had been scripted and safe. Now there were changes happening I couldn't control. I was really hurt by the coach's remark and said to myself, "I'm never, ever going to be fat again."

Almost immediately, I began eating very little and spent all my free time running. But then I'd have this uncontrollable, demonic urge to eat ice cream, cookies, doughnuts—anything high-calorie. And I'd eat until I couldn't eat anymore. Afterward, I couldn't bear the thought that it would stay in me and turn into fat, so I'd have to purge. During the worst periods, I'd binge and purge four or five times a day, from the moment I woke up until I went to sleep. By April, I was down to 110, and I looked like a cadaver.

The purging was really painful, and it made me feel horrible, disgusting and wretched. I shared a campus dormitory suite with four other women, and when I went into the bathroom I'd lock the door and turn the water on to over the sound. But my roommates knew. One of them brought me library books on anorexia and persuaded my coach to make me see a counselor. It didn't help. I just sat there until the session was over. My mom found out that spring, and when I visited her in Albuquerque in April she arranged for me to see a family friend who was a psychiatrist. But in my family, people are private. No one was going to hear of my problem and say, "Enough is enough," and plunk me in treatment. Nobody in my family had ever seen a therapist, and when I stopped going after one visit, my mom and one of my sisters, who were the only ones who knew of my problem, didn't push me further. And I was still in denial and didn't think I needed a psychiatrist.

When I graduated in June I was very depressed, and it was difficult to be with people. I took a job teaching English and coaching soccer at a private boarding school in Colorado Springs but quit a year later when Nike offered to sponsor me as a runner. For the next four years, I tried to make a go as an amateur athlete, first in Boston, then back in Colorado. My eating improved a bit when I was training because I was happy. But whenever I got injured and couldn't run, I'd fall back into the bingeing and purging several times a day for weeks and months at a time. I was dehydrated, I was cold all the time, my hands would shake, and I would get headaches. And I had horrible nightmares that I would just eat and get bigger like this huge blimp.

Most people didn't know I had a problem. In relationships, I would pick men who wouldn't try to get too close to me. And I did a good job of hiding things. No one noticed when I didn't eat—I'd take just a couple of bites of what was on my plate and then mound it up all together so it didn't look like much. The bingeing and purging I'd do behind closed doors. But I was trying everything to control my problem. I learned to meditate, I prayed, I went to group and individual therapy and Overeaters Anonymous meetings. Either the techniques weren't right for me or I wasn't ready for them.

Sometimes I was actually sorry that the eating disorder wouldn't kill me, and I'd think, "Please, just let me out of this."

In February 1984, I met Federico at a race in Denver. I placed first among the women and, as mayor, he presented me with the award. I thought he was very down-to-earth and genuine, and we seemed to hit it off. But I couldn't imagine that anyone could like me if they knew about this horrible part of my life. When we started dating, I told him I had an eating problem and was working on it, but I made sure he didn't find out how bad it

was. Hiding it was actually pretty easy. Federico was working at least 15 hours a day, and after I started law school at the University of Colorado at Boulder in the fall of 1985 we couldn't spend that much time together.

Several months later I found a therapist who specialized in eating disorders, but I didn't begin to make progress until I started with yet another therapist in 1987. She helped me see how my eating was connected to my perfectionism and my need for control. I remember in grade school going into the bathroom and crying whenever my team lost because I felt I hadn't done enough to make us win. As the second oldest of eight children, I had been a caretaker growing up so I also didn't know how to ask for help. I felt like a failure acknowledging that I wasn't all that strong or capable, and I had been trying to escape those negative feelings by bingeing and purging. But as I began to deal with my fears, my confidence grew. I really believed I could get better, so when Federico proposed in 1987, I said yes.

We married in May 1988. I graduated law school the same month and took a job with a prestigious firm in Denver. Then the following October I learned I was pregnant. I never told Federico the full extent of my eating disorder, and now I didn't tell my obstetrician. For a while I was good about my eating, but before long I was bingeing and purging. Then, six months into my pregnancy, I began to have really significant contractions. That was the moment when I said, "Stop. You have to take care of your body, and your body is now carrying a baby." I'm absolutely convinced that if I hadn't been in therapy for a long time, I wouldn't have been able to turn the corner.

It wasn't easy. I would eat and feel so bloated, and then the old feelings would kick in—eating equals fat equals bad. Keeping in touch with my therapist in Boulder, I just had to take a leap of faith that it was really going to turn out okay. Amazingly I'm still okay. Through Nellia's birth that July and Cristina's birth 19 months later and all the stress of moving to Washington in 1993, my eating problem has not resurfaced. Even when I suffered a miscarriage that July, I knew I was strong enough to withstand the pain. I don't think the lost pregnancy was as real to Federico as it was to me, but when he asked me if I wanted to go back into therapy to help work through my sadness, I told him I had the tools now to deal with pain myself.

Although Federico had attended a few therapy sessions with me, we never had the 3-hour, tearful kind of talk about my illness you might expect because I was too afraid to reveal the depths of my disease. In fact, I don't think he truly understood how bad it was until last fall when I showed him an article I'd written for the "Road Runners Club of America" newsletter. I think he felt bad that he hadn't understood. My response was that he had done all I had allowed him to do, which was basically to stand by me.

I'm running and even competing again, for the first time I can run just for the enjoyment of it. I've also learned to manage my weight, which is now 125, without getting totally compulsive and weird. A couple of months ago I gained four or five pounds, but I just said, "Oh well, I'll have to be more thoughtful about food choices." That felt great. There are still times when I'm tempted to binge and purge, and I think, "Maybe just today . . ." But I'm strong enough to resist it. I'm not walking near that cliff again because going over the edge was my private hell. I can't go back.